

SESAME STREET EDUCATES AND ENTERTAINS INTERNATIONALLY

**By Michael Jay Friedman
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While on his way to Norway to accept the 2001 Nobel Peace Prize, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan stopped off to conduct a delicate mission. A cheerful red monster and his friends could not agree who would sing the “Alphabet Song.” Fortunately, Annan’s diplomatic skills proved equal to the task, and the dispute was resolved to the satisfaction of all: everybody sang!

The site of the secretary-general’s assignment was Sesame Street, where humans, puppets and animated characters teach youngsters their letters and numbers, the days of the week, how to tell time and other valuable skills.

Sesame Street was developed by a team of artists, writers and child development experts at the Children’s Television Workshop, a division of National Educational Television, a predecessor of today’s Public Broadcasting Service.

The show responded to a 1968 Carnegie Corporation study revealing the long hours that American preschoolers were exposed to commercial television. In May 1969, The New York Times reported that Sesame Street “had the most extensive planning for any television show to date.” The workshop tested elements of the show at New York area day care centers, and the only commercials, said the Times, would be “animated spots selling various letters of the alphabet.”

Since its first telecast in the United States in September 1969, Sesame Street has evolved into 20 international editions, each with its own unique characters and flavor, and has been

broadcast in more than 120 countries, making it the most widely viewed children's television show in the world.

The U.S. version reaches approximately 8 million viewers each week, and has won 97 Emmy Awards (the American prize for excellence in television broadcasting) -- more than any other show.

Sesame Street has expanded from the television screen into books and magazines, licensed products, day care centers and other outreach efforts. What, then, is the secret to its success?

Friendly characters are a big part of the formula. The U.S. cast always has been chosen to demonstrate diversity. Linda, introduced in the late 1970s, was deaf, and read stories in American Sign Language, while her assistant read them aloud.

Luis, who first appeared during the 1971–1972 season, is the longest-running Hispanic character on American television, and African-Americans Gordon (played over the years by three different actors) and Susan appeared in the show from its start.

Over the years, these regulars have been joined by special guests from nearly every walk of life. Prominent figures have ranged from first lady Laura Bush (reading Wubba, Wubba, Wubba to Elmo, Big Bird and a number of children) to activist Ralph Nader, who joined music teacher Bob to perform People in Your Neighborhood. Laura Bush also has appeared on the Egyptian version of Sesame Street.

The Sesame Street Muppets characters were created by Jim Henson (1936–1990) as a combination puppet and marionette. These include such Sesame Street staples as Count Von Count, who counts virtually all objects in his path and presents the "Number of the Day" and friendly blue monster Grover, who, in his new role as "Global Grover," teaches children to accept their differences, as he shows home movies from his many travels.

Among the most popular characters is Elmo, an irrepressible red monster whose explorations of "Elmo's World" includes such regular features as "Ask Mister Noodle" (a human mime character) and "Elmo Has a Question for YOU" (teaches counting). Elmo was an honored attendee at President Bill Clinton's second inauguration in 1997.

Sesame Street continues to evolve. The current season, the show's 36th, introduces the Healthy Habits for Life initiative described by one of its architects as "teaching children the

importance of their bodies and how to keep them healthy." Youngsters learn about nutrition, how to keep their bodies clean and the importance of getting enough rest.

But mostly Sesame Street is about fun. Musical numbers like "C' is for Cookie," "Rubber Duckie" (which reached Number 16 on the pop music charts in 1970) and It's Not Easy Being Green are part of a common experience shared by the nearly 75 million Americans who have grown up watching the show.

Even the secretary-general suggests that world leaders could learn much from Sesame Street. "Elmo and his friends ... tell it straight," he said.

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